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## The Spirituality of the Magnificat

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## THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE MAGNIFICAT

*Sister Mary Catherine Nolan, O.P.\**

### Introduction

In the first chapter of the infancy narrative of the third gospel, Luke sets before us a lovely scene of the Visitation of the youthful Mary to her aged cousin, Elizabeth. In response to Elizabeth's greeting, Mary breathes a song into the air. From the pages of the gospel, Mary's song has become part of the Church's evening prayer and of our treasury of sacred music. It is familiar to us by the title, Magnificat.

The themes which I address in this reflection upon the spirituality of the Magnificat are taken from those which emerged in a qualitative study of this psalm using the methodology of interpretive inquiry. Paul Ricoeur, in explaining the concept of "the world of a text," tells us that discourse has a reference which he calls its "world." This "world" is a situation which is common to the speaker and the hearer. When written, discourse becomes fixed, yet the meaning of what is written is able to move beyond the author's original intention. As the text becomes distanced from the original situation of the discourse, it creates a "world" which it projects ahead of itself.<sup>1</sup>

The exegesis of the Magnificat (Luke 1: 46-55), reveals to us the world behind the text and allows us to at least partially grasp what the author intended his readers to understand in the words of a song put upon the lips of Mary. Yet we are distanced from the writer by two millennia. In her insightful writ-

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text," in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 78.

ing on biblical hermeneutics, Sandra Schneiders calls the world projected by the gospel, the world in front of the text, the world of Christian discipleship. It is the world structured by the paschal mystery of Jesus, where there is hope of liberation for all in the reign of God.<sup>2</sup>

This is the world of the Magnificat which I explored by asking people familiar with it to explain the meaning it had for them. Mary's Song lives today in the hearts of those who pray it. The interpretation which was given to it came directly from the world view and experience of those who shared their insights.

### **Spirituality**

Spirituality is a way of relating to God, i.e., a way of being religious. First, spirituality is an interior disposition. It entails an attentiveness to the presence and action of God within us and in the world around us. Secondly, spirituality is an exterior way of being, a life style. Christian spirituality is the cultivation of a style of life consistent with the presence of the Spirit of the Risen Christ within us and with our status as members of the Body of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Catholic spirituality is that which is consistent with the tradition of the Catholic Church which, I might add, gives much room for diversity. Those of us who belong to religious orders or congregations claim an identifying charism which gives a specific characteristic to the way we worship or pray. I could, for example, claim a Dominican spirituality.

The liturgy of the mass, the prayers of the divine office and *lectio divina* point to Catholic spirituality as biblically based. We turn to the scriptures for life, truth, direction. We come to scripture with our life experiences and meet ourselves there. What is the spirituality of the Magnificat? The text of the Magnificat presents us with a theology. Spirituality—interior in disposition, exterior in lifestyle—is in the person who prays or studies it.

<sup>2</sup>Sandra M. Schneiders, "Feminist Ideology Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19/1 (1989):8.

<sup>3</sup>This definition is derived from that given by Richard McBrien in his text, *Catholicism, Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1981), 1257.

From my conversations with college students the last five years, I note that some appear to be deeply spiritual but not necessarily rooted in the kind of biblical spirituality that is the experience of many of us. When I ask them to share with me what Mary's Song means to them, they might say some surprising things, such as, "Mary seems to have so much self-confidence; she knows who she is and what her purpose in life is." What the young people have brought to the text of the Magnificat is their own personality and struggle to find purpose and meaning in their lives.

A pioneer of modern scriptural interpretation and founder of the École Biblique in Jerusalem, Père Marie Joseph Lagrange attributed many of the graces of his life to Mary. He tells in his memoirs that in 1883, as a young Dominican, shortly before his ordination to the priesthood, he received word that his father was gravely ill—dying. At this time, the political situation in France had forced the Dominicans to move their house of studies to Spain. It was a painful exile for Lagrange. He felt that his father, who loved him very much, had counted on him to sustain his mother and sisters and had thus been disappointed in his choice to enter religious life. In distress at this situation, his anxiety took the form of fervent prayer at the feet of Mary. He writes, "To an extraordinary degree I joined myself to the interior dispositions of this great Christian."<sup>4</sup>

Mary's Song lives today in the mind and heart of those who sing it. When I asked people to share with me the meaning that they find in this psalm, for the most part they spoke of it as though it were indeed the words of the historical Mary of Nazareth. So I shall speak of it that way also. In considering the Magnificat as the words of Mary, we can attempt, like Père Lagrange, to enter into her interior dispositions as expressed in the song. This is the highest homage that we can pay Our Lady.

Three major themes that surfaced in responses to the question of meaning in the Magnificat were those of God's mercy, joy and hope. Other themes which surfaced were those of gratitude, holiness, blessedness, lowliness, wonder at God's

<sup>4</sup>Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Père Lagrange: Personal Reflections and Memoirs*, trans. Henry Wansbrough (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 225.

works, mission, remembrance. This does not exhaust the topics. Many insights into the spiritual journey surfaced as personal experiences were brought to the text and meaning was uncovered. Overall, Mary's Song soars on the wings of hope.

### **The Reign of God: A Source of Hope**

The Magnificat is set in the context of Luke's theology of the coming of the *Reign of God*. In the embrace of Mary and Elizabeth, the age of preparation and the age of fulfillment intersect. God's plan unfolds. In Mary's womb the Messianic age is breaking into human history in a silent, hidden way. In an exuberance of joy, Mary announces the action of God in bringing about the fulfillment of his promise of salvation. God acts on behalf of the oppressed and against the oppressors in bestowing mercy on those who fear, confusing the arrogant in their conceit, pulling down tyrants from power, lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, revealing the emptiness of riches. God is acting in history to bring about a situation of justice, peace and love among people. In the psalm, this is God's consistent action. Herein lies the powerful message of hope and we cling to this hope, sometimes with desperation.

In reflecting upon the lines of the Magnificat which announce God's action in sustaining the poor and lowly, one sister, who worked for years among the very poor of Appalachia, remarked, "I certainly think that it's nice that Mary believed that all those things were going to happen, that God was going to confuse the proud and show his might. But it just seems like those things happen in such subtle ways that they're not as clear and corporal and immediate as this sounds, although they certainly do happen. Then I look at the hungry that we have and I think, some of these people have been hungry for an awfully long time. I get impatient with God. I don't see the rich being sent away empty. Things don't happen fast enough for me. I wish justice would come down and reign as Mary says it there. It's a beautiful prayer. The reality of the lived experience is a little less clear. From generation to generation the poor have struggled for ordinary human survival with patience and tried to do their best under very restrictive things in their lives. It's a depressing thing."

Was this sister discouraged? Perhaps. But she stayed with the work for years, organizing a clinic, a community center, an education center for high school equivalency, a thrift shop, bringing together people from the community to help each other and give hope to each other. Why? "It's the people there," she would say, "their love and energy to help each other." The economic situation of the area is scarcely better now than before this sister arrived there. Yet, people have organized and resources have been found to bring needed services to the area. The expectation that God has acted and will act on behalf of the poor and oppressed, as Mary proclaims, sustains hope even in the midst of depressing situations.

Where is the Reign of God? The Reign of God is in your midst Jesus told us. It is in the midst of our families, our communities, our workplace, our place of worship, our place of play. Most specifically, the Reign of God is in the midst of the web of relationships in which we exist. It is the reign of right relationships. It is wherever God is acting to lead individuals to holiness. It is also wherever God is acting to reverse a situation of oppression. In the sermon on the plain, Luke sets forth beatitudes that are signposts to where the Reign of God is happening within the human condition. Mary has pointed out how God is at work in the midst of people's struggle for survival and for fullness of life. This action of God is indeed the cause of our hope.

Sometimes God's action is visible and concrete for those who have eyes to see it. Attentiveness to the presence and action of God within ourselves and in the world around us cultivates spiritual insight. We all have our own stories of perceiving God's action in persons and events. "He has shown strength with his arm. He has come to the aid of his servant people according to his promises," sings Mary in her Magnificat. Faith in God's promises sustains the hope that God is acting in human history to bring all things into right relationship. In the words of Mary's Song we hear a realized eschatology. The final victory over all the forces of evil is in process. Hope must be sustained, for hope energizes us to move forward in participation with the action of God in bringing about a situation of right relationships. God's strong right arm reaches

across continents to bring about a victory of justice. We do not control it. Perhaps we only document it. The Reign of God, a reign of right relationships, is a cause of hope.

### **God's Mercy**

The most often mentioned theme in those who shared their reflections on the Magnificat with me is God's mercy. Over and over again I heard how much we are in need of God's mercy. The prayer of the Russian pilgrim, "Jesus, Son of God, Savior, have mercy on me," is well-known. It would seem that the need for God's mercy is most recognized by those who are persons of prayer. The plea for God's mercy was a constant prayer of St. Dominic, who prayed not only for himself but also that God would have mercy upon the people. The statement, "And his mercy is from generation to generation on those who fear him," is put upon the lips of Mary, in whom is summed up all the religious aspirations of her people. It expresses the traditional understanding of the relationship between the people of Israel and Yahweh, their God. The word "mercy" (*eleos* in Greek, *hesed* in Hebrew) denotes both a disposition and an appropriate way of acting between two parties pledged to each other in a relationship of mutual trust and faithfulness. God's *hesed* always means his loving kindness and faithful help based upon the covenant relationship.

In the Magnificat, Mary first speaks of God's regard for her own lowliness, and then of God's mercy on those who fear him. Those who are to benefit from God's mercy are those fearing him, that is, those who have a religious and filial attitude of respect for God. The concept of God's mercy being toward those who fear him is found in other places in the Hebrew scriptures, for example, in Psalm 103. Some thought that the concept of fear should be explained. Frequently it means awe or reverence. In the Wisdom literature, fear of God is depicted as the beginning of wisdom and is equated with knowledge and insight. The thought of fearing God is frequent in Luke's writing. Righteous ones are God-fearing ones.

Biblically, to fear God is to be in covenant relationship with God. God's covenant relationship to those committed to him is characterized by mercy (*hesed*), loving kindness and

absolute fidelity. The yearning to experience God's mercy grows as one grows in relationship with God, passing from fear of the Lord to wisdom. Wisdom enables one to see the divine truth in all things, to perceive how all relates to God, to realize the expansiveness of God's mercy. I have known people of wisdom and marveled at their inner freedom, simplicity and sense of humor. When all is perceived in the light of God's loving mercy, the existential anxiety which drives much of the frantic activity seen in today's society abates. Energies are directed toward what is deemed important in God's eyes. John of the Cross states what is important when he writes that in the evening of life we will be judged on love.

Consideration of God's mercy sustains hope that God, who is absolutely faithful to his promises, is acting in the events of our lives and in the events of history. Some of those events are dark indeed. In Elie Wiesel's story *Night*, the elderly rabbi in the Nazi death camp cries out in anguish, "Where is the divine mercy?" And finally, "Where is God?" Where is the mercy of God? Where is the God of mercy? For those hanging between hope and despair the questions burn with intensity. In the six decades since the experience of the holocaust, Elie Wiesel has riveted the attention of countless young people on the deepest questions of human existence and on the responsibility to be agents of God's mercy toward all others. The words have been heard, but, in many places in the world, the inhumanity continues.

"His mercy endures from generation to generation," Mary proclaims. Two millennia after those words were written, those who fear God find God's mercy in the events of their own lives and in history. This concept of God's faithfulness in bestowing mercy was captured wonderfully by Francis Thompson in his poem *The Hound of Heaven*. God pursues the soul who tries to flee. That God's mercy should be from generation to generation almost gives us the idea that it is inherited. Pastors could probably tell stories of persons who seek them out to learn about a faith which had been that of their ancestors years ago and which they want to reclaim. One young man shared with me an account of his conversion in which he was seized by an overwhelming experience of God's



love for him. He struggled with the sense of being unworthy of this love. Why was he so graced? "Perhaps," he said, "because my grandmother prays for me a lot."

Mary's faith is the faith of Israel. She proclaims that God is fulfilling his promise to her ancestors, to Abraham and to all inheritors of Abraham's faith. Our ancestors in the faith have bestowed upon us a rich legacy. We belong to the communion of saints, but perhaps we do not appreciate how much God's mercy is mediated to us by the example and prayers of our ancestors.

### **Joy and Gratitude**

The second most often-mentioned sense of Mary's Song, after that of God's mercy, was joy. The scene of a youthful, radiant Mary received and welcomed by the aged Elizabeth has been a favorite of artists over the centuries. Symbolically, Elizabeth personifies the wisdom and holiness of all those faithful people who received God's mercy in the long tradition of the First Covenant. Mary, transformed by grace, stands at the point of the in-breaking of the Messianic Reign of God. A new and astonishing relationship between God and humanity has been forged in Mary who bears God's Son. It is the dawn of the New Covenant, a time of joy. Joy permeates the encounter. Elizabeth responds to Mary's arrival with joy and humility: "Blessed are you among women and blest is the fruit of your womb. But who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me? The moment your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby leapt in my womb for joy." In turn Mary's joy pours forth in praise of God. "My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit finds joy in God my Savior, for he has looked upon his servant in her lowliness." The cause of Mary's joy is God's intervention in her life and in human history. Her joy overflows in the experience of God's regard for her, who is poor and of low estate.

In Luke's gospel, joy accompanies announcements of salvation. Mary has called God "my savior," words which in Hebrew are equivalent to "my Jesus." Joy is also linked with the condition of being poor and lowly. Those whose life situation provides them with scarce resources and who experience a profound sense of their dependence have a special claim on

God's beneficence. Luke's first beatitude proclaims, "Happy are you poor for the reign of God is yours." This is a surprise. Is joy to be found in a situation of poverty and lowliness? Destitution is a social evil, as is the loss of respect that is often the lot of the lowly. Mary's song foretells the reversals which are part of God's reign. Expectations of finding happiness in prestige, power and wealth are frustrated. Joy is experienced in the recognition of God's dynamic presence in one's life, in the life of a community and, more broadly, in the forces that shape human history.

Many have shared with me how they relate to Mary's joy in the Magnificat. One woman, confined to a wheelchair because of a painful arthritic condition, spoke of being overwhelmed with joy when making pastoral visits to patients in a hospital. The words of the Magnificat sprang to her lips as a way to express that joy. Others have shared how they resonated Mary's sentiments when they experienced beauty in nature. A young Vietnamese refugee shared how he prayed the Magnificat after communion.

Joy accompanies inner freedom. In an address to his community at Gethsemani Abbey, Thomas Merton told his fellow monks that our culture induces people to think and act in a way that leads to frustration: its predominant question is, "Am I happy?" The real question is not "Am I happy," but "Am I free?" There is a deep longing in the human heart to experience the freedom which is the essence of personhood. What is it that limits our inner freedom? Is it the fear of losing something that society tells us is important? Mary sings of her joy because God has regarded her lowliness. Perhaps it is the lowly who know the joy of inner freedom, because they have no prestige or riches to lose.

Mary sings forth her gratitude to God. Gratitude is an attitude, a stance toward life. Gratitude anchors us in hope that, whatever suffering the circumstances of life inflict upon us, all is meaningful in God's regard for us. All has led to the present moment of our lives, and life itself is good. Gratitude, experienced and expressed, is characteristic of a healthy spiritual life.

The astounding courage that comes from a life lived in gratitude was brought home to me one Christmas when I drove

through a near blizzard from Detroit to Chicago to visit my family and bring communion from the Christmas liturgy to my elderly, ill mother. My heart ached as I entered the nursing home and my senses were assaulted by the sights, sounds and smells of the place. My mother's face glowed with joy as she greeted me, even though my identity was uncertain. After receiving the eucharist with great devotion, my mother spent some time in prayer. Then turning to me with a beautiful smile she told me to always remember to thank God for life's blessings. "God has been so good to us," she said. "Pa used to gather us together around his chair and remind us to always remember God's goodness and be grateful." Alzheimer's disease had not obliterated the attitude of gratitude that had permeated my mother's life.

If gratitude is the attitude of a healthy spiritual life the shadow side is resentment. Resentment is crippling. Resentment shrinks the capacity to love. Resentment is unhealthy. Mary proclaims God's blessings to herself and to her people; yes even to all generations. Surely, entering into the inner disposition of joy and gratitude expressed by Mary in her song is an antidote to the toxic attitude of resentment. "My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God, my savior because he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaid." Mary does not resent but embraces her low estate. It is this lowliness that God has regarded, and future generations of lowly ones will know that they too are blessed in Mary's blessedness.

### **God's Regard**

As a young Jewish woman, Mary praises God in the tradition of her people. The God who looked upon her lowly status with gracious regard is the God of the psalmists who looks upon the afflicted to rescue them. Mary calls herself servant or handmaid. As a handmaid of low estate, Mary occupies a position of poverty and powerlessness in her society.

The condition of being lowly is not deemed to be a happy state in our society. The lowly are often ignored. Often they live in loneliness and isolation. They wait in line for social services, in medical clinics, perhaps in food lines or shelters. Transportation may be problematic or nonexistent, adequate

housing uncertain. One does not aspire to be lowly or powerless in the land of abundance. Yet, in the beatitudes of Luke's gospel, the poor are deemed happy because the "reign of God" is theirs. We wonder at this word. Does a condition of lowliness give one a special claim on God? Are the lowly more attuned to their own need for God and more attentive to the needs of others. We hear God's word through the ears of our own experience and we wonder.

Mary here places herself in the midst of a special group of people with low social status, who are materially poor, powerless and afflicted. These are the biblical *anawim*, the poor of the Lord, the faithful, remnant people of Israel of whom Zechariah speaks. She praises God not only on her own behalf but also for all these faithful, devout people. It is through them that, in the prophecy, salvation was to come to Israel. God's regard for the lowliness of Mary gives rise to the hope that God's action in casting down the mighty and raising up the lowly is now happening, that is, the reign of God is in process.

God is personal and caring. In the biblical sense, grace and abundance result when God's benevolent face is turned toward one. Like the sun that sheds life-giving rays upon green plants, God's gaze is life-giving and empowering. As the morning sun dispels darkness and penetrates murky corners, God's gaze shines upon his loved ones bestowing clarity of vision and insight. God's regard might also be understood in the sense of a loving parent smiling with tenderness and delight at a child. The child is powerless and knows his/her dependence upon the parent. Under the gaze of parental love and approval, the child experiences emotional security.

At the time of the Angel Gabriel's visit to Mary (the Annunciation), Mary is greeted as one who is highly favored. The best known translation of the angel's greeting is "full of grace." This can also be understood as "one who has already been transformed by grace." Mary, mother of the one who is called holy, son of God by the angel (Luke 1:35), is first recipient of the Holy Spirit which will be poured out upon the whole church at Pentecost. The Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx explains this as follows:

The New Testament and above all the Gospel of John says that . . . Jesus was completely filled with the Holy Spirit and acted on the basis of this gift of spiritual fullness in his earthly life. Only 'with Pentecost'—not before and not after—was the Spirit of God, which is the Spirit of Christ, also poured out on the people redeemed by the messianic Jesus. . . . [There is one] exception to this merely Paschal gift of the Spirit. . . . the historical Miriam, mother of Jesus, also receives the Holy Spirit before Pentecost. . . . Mary is the first to share in the history of the Holy Spirit which takes place in our secular history, a real history which is set in motion by Jesus Christ, and her name is associated with his work of salvation.<sup>5</sup>

How wonderful to have a personal experience of God's regard, to truly know God's transforming love. Mary's privilege prepared her for her mission in life. We too are recipients of God's regard. The gift of the Spirit of Christ is now in the world and available to us. Faith tells us that this is so. We believe it as a truth of faith, expressed in the Creed, but it must also be a truth determining our daily outlook and actions.

In my association with college students I have had many conversations about faith. Often when a young person is struggling with faith, the real issue is not whether God exists but whether God really cares. How does the question of God's existence influence me, a much less perfect person. Can God love me, look upon with pleasure when I do not keep the rules, when I know my moral failures, my own unlovingness. I see good people suffer. How can a loving God exist? Now most college students are smart enough to understand that it is not possible to empirically prove that God exists. Nor can it be proved that God does not exist. Neither the believer nor the unbeliever can be absolutely sure. This is the common ground between the two.

One young man sought me out to tell me that, since he no longer believed, he had stopped going to church. However, at the time of his confirmation, he had made a commitment to the church. Now he was terrified that he was going to hell. This fear is not inconsistent with his statement of disbelief. It points

<sup>5</sup>Edward Schillebeeckx and Catharina Halkes, *Mary: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 26.

up that deep within the human psyche there is the sense that there is someone to whom we are responsible for our actions. This sense of the "Other" may be the place where faith is re-discovered, as it was in the case of a young man who went to an isolated place, hurled a passionate statement of disbelief in God heavenward and then sat down to wait for a response.

If I risk believing that God exists, then I also risk that God may not be pleased with me. Our experience teaches us that when we measure up to others expectations, we enjoy their approval. If we cannot measure up to what we think God expects of us, it may be hard for us to accept the fact that God loves us just as we are. Is God pleased with me? This is the question that underlies our spiritual anxieties. We can be told that God does not love us because we are good. We are good because God loves us. But unless we experience being loved by others, it is a great leap of trust to accept being loved by God.

Mary experienced God's favor, God's loving regard of her in her lowliness. To know we are lowly, limited, sinful, obnoxious and still loved is to experience some freedom from the underlying existential anxiety that plagues our spiritual life. Is God pleased with me? We cannot know with certainty, but we can make that leap of trust in God's fidelity to us. God chose that we should be. Life is a process of understanding the truth of our own existence and of becoming what we are in God's sight, profoundly lovable.

In Mary's womb God became incarnate in the human experience. The transforming Spirit poured out upon Mary two thousand years ago is present to us today, present in all our human experiences. God's regard for Mary in her lowliness was the cause of Mary's joy. We can rejoice in our lowliness, in the limitations of our human nature. This is where God chooses to be present. God's face is turned to us and shines upon us just as we are. Prayer may be as simple as turning our faces to God in a moment of conscious awareness that God is regarding us.

Edith Stein, a martyr of the Holocaust, was recently canonized. Born an orthodox Jewess, in 1891 at Breslau, Germany, she became a university teacher, philosopher and writer. In a soul-wrenching decision and against the objections of her family that she deeply loved, Edith converted to Catholicism and

entered the Carmelite Order, taking the name Sister Teresa Benedicta. Taken from her monastery by the Gestapo, she died in the gas chamber at Auschwitz on August 9, 1942. An extraordinary trust in God's love shines through her writings. This trust was a source of peace to her.

When night comes, and retrospect shows that everything was patchwork and much which one had planned is left undone, when so many things rouse shame and regret, then take all as it is, lay it in God's hands and offer it up to him. In this way we will be able to rest in him, actually to rest, and to begin the new day like a new life.<sup>6</sup>

Dame Julian of Norwich, a late-fourteenth-century anchoress, had such trust in God's goodness and love for her that she puzzled over the consequences of sin. She writes that the Lord taught her that sin had no manner of substance nor particle of being. It cannot be known except by the pain that is caused thereby.

It is true that sin is the cause of all this pain. But all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.<sup>7</sup>

"God has looked with favor upon the low estate of his servant girl," Mary sings out. This is the song of all who are conscious of their lowliness. Under God's gaze, all shall be well.

### **Mary's Blessedness**

Elizabeth has affirmed Mary's condition of one who bears a holy child. The older woman has also shown her wise insight into Mary's inner spirit in affirming Mary's faith and trust. "Blest is she who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled," Elizabeth states.

In her response to Elizabeth, Mary sings out with prophetic vision, "Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed." Gabriel, the angel, told Mary that her child would be

<sup>6</sup>Steven Payne, "Edith Stein: A Fragmented Life," *America* 149 (10 Oct. 1998):14.

<sup>7</sup>Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. James Walsh, S.J. (St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press, 1975), 102.

the Son of the Most High and that he would reign in the House of David forever. He was to be named Jesus which, in the Hebrew form, means Savior. It is not unusual that a woman of Israel would claim to be blessed in the bearing of a child. Leah, the wife of Jacob, exclaimed at the birth of her son Asher, "All women count me blessed" (Gen. 30:13). Mary, however, sees beyond her personal blessing to the blessing that the child will be for all people, for all ages.

It is common in the psalms that the psalmist, as an individual, praises God for personal blessings but also speaks with a collective voice, representing all those blessed in a similar way. The welfare of all is enhanced by the blessing given to one who has a concern for all, for the common good. Through Mary's personal blessing, the whole people are blessed. It is good to keep in mind that the talents, gifts, blessings given to each of us is not only for us but for others. The more we share our blessing of gifts and talents with others, the more God is magnified in us. Happiness with who we are in our own giftedness glorifies God. Happiness that others are gifted in a way that we may not be also glorifies God. In today's competitive society, we early learn to compete with others for affirmation and recognition. School sports are highly competitive, as is academic achievement. Position in our workplaces may be bitterly competitive. We subscribe to the teeter-totter idea that, for one to go up, the other must go down. But sharing gifts and promoting the gifts of others puts us at least on an even keel or at best on an elevator. Everyone and everything goes up.

Mary states the time of her personal blessing. It is "from now on." Luke, uses this phrase several times in his gospel to refer to the coming age of salvation. For Mary, the time of which she speaks began with Elizabeth's greeting and will continue on for "all generations." In Mary, God is beginning the final age of the exaltation of the lowly. With this in mind we are better able to grasp the seeming paradox of the beatitudes, those signposts of the reign of God, where happiness and blessings are interchangeable.

Blest are you poor; the reign of God is yours.

Blest are you who hunger; you shall be filled.

Blest are you who are weeping; you shall laugh. (Luke 6:21-22)



The prayers of the lowly have always seemed to me to hold a special power. Whenever I visit someone who is homebound or in a nursing home, I ask for their prayers. More blessings have come to me from those I served than my service has ever warranted. I once gave a ride home to an elderly lady who was waiting for a bus that was no longer running. We had a remarkable conversation on the way to her home in a poor and reputedly dangerous section of town. As we entered her neighborhood, she remarked that I should not be afraid because she was with me. Later, she asked if she could do something for me. I requested her prayers. She pinned me down immediately. She would pray for something specific. So I mentioned to her my need. She asked for a few more details about my situation, and then, with conviction in her voice, informed me that I would get an answer. In a short time I had my answer.

Her message that I need not be afraid because I was with her and to be specific about what I wanted have stayed with me and been a blessing to me. Do we expect God to give us what we want when we know not what it is we really want? A restless longing in our hearts may lead us in first one direction and then another. The one sure direction is the one taken by Mary, to say to God as she did, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say." Once we have basically oriented our lives toward God, there are still specific directions that we must choose.

Freedom to choose is of the essence of what it means to be human. I do not believe that we need to search for extraordinary signs or agonize too much over our choices. If we are basically oriented toward God's love, then God will be with us in whatever direction we choose after we have prayerfully and intelligently considered our options. Consulting with others known to be wise and trustworthy is always a prudent thing to do when faced with an important decision. But in the end we must bear responsibility for our own choices. When we move into the deepest part of our being and search out that for which we most long, we come close to knowing where God is calling us. In quiet reflection, we ponder the way that God is present in all the circumstances of our lives. It is here in these ordinary daily happenings that God speaks to us in the present and lights our way into the future.

The moment of Mary's *Fiat*, of her acceptance of her role as Mother of the Son of God, was a pivotal point in the turning of the universe. Upon her reply, a new phase of human history began. Her clear direction was to cooperate with God's plan of salvation, whatever that would mean for her. She had to face the future in faith and trust. The aged Elizabeth, with the wisdom of her years, understood the faith that was needed and affirmed Mary in her trust in the Lord's promises. A nurse, who works with psychiatric patients, once remarked to me that Mary must have had a healthy self-image to be able to claim that all generations would call her blessed. The concept of a healthy self-image is a modern one. To have clarity concerning who one is and in what direction one is going is to be blessed indeed.

My work with college students has convinced me of the blessing there is in being grounded in one's life purpose. There is a basic direction in life from which all other directions flow. Thomas Merton states it succinctly when he writes concerning prayer:

The gift of prayer is inseparable from another grace: that of humility, which makes us realize that the very depths of our being and life are meaningful and real only in so far as they are oriented toward God as their source and their end.<sup>8</sup>

Humility is truth. The humility of which Merton speaks is knowing the truth of who we really are in the light of who God is. It was Mary's humility that gave her clarity of vision. College freshmen often arrive on campus with delightful confidence and enthusiasm. They are filled with dreams for the future. By senior year, the dreams may have been altered by their experiences. Perhaps they have changed their major course of studies several times. But still the dream is there. Yet these students have no clue what life holds for them. To have a basic orientation toward God, to understand oneself as a participant in the coming of the reign of God, is indeed a blessing. Existential philosophers might characterize life as absurd, but those who

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image, Doubleday, 1990), 70.

share Mary's faith trust that just to be is blessing, for the ultimate goal of life's journey is union with God.

One semester I had an insightful young man from Ghana—Kwesi was his name—in my class on world religions. When I asked the class what they hoped to derive from the course, he replied that he wanted to know why people who worship the same God are killing each other. It was a question to which I had no answer. At the end of the term, Kwesi told me that the class had assisted him in finding a basic direction for his life. He wanted to return to Africa as a lawyer and spend his life working for justice and peace. A few months later, I received a letter from him thanking me for helping answer his questions. He began the letter with an African proverb which reads, "It is only when a life has ended and ended well, that one dare say 'well done.'" He went on to say that before one's life can end well it must have a direction, and someone is needed to help in finding that direction.

In Mary's blessing of divine motherhood, all humanity is blest for all time. In sharing our own personal blessings, others are blest. The rest of Mary's life would be oriented toward the coming reign of God realized in her son. Jesus' highest praise of his mother was not for her motherhood but that she was the paradigm of the disciple: one who "trusts that the promises of the Lord to her will be fulfilled," one who "hears the word of God and keeps it." Her trust and faith led her to the foot of the cross and to the experience of resurrection.

### **Holy Is God's Name**

Who is Mary praising in her Song? Who are we praising when we sing it with her? I have defined spirituality as attentiveness to the presence and action of God within us and in the world around us. But who is God? In sharing reflections on the Magnificat some have spoken of experiencing the presence of God in their lives, and it is this experience which enables them to relate to Mary's words. In the words of the Song, understood as Mary's own words, she is perceived to be a contemplative who experienced a deep relationship with God and reflected all things back to God. She had integrated the scriptures into her life. Let us consider how Mary identifies God.

In keeping with the practice in late Judaism, she does not speak God's name directly. In place of God's name, Yahweh, God is called "Lord," "Savior" and "Holy One." Elsewhere in the infancy narrative, Luke applies these same terms to Mary's son. Jesus is called "Holy One" by the Angel Gabriel at the time of the Annunciation (1:35); "Lord" by Elizabeth as she greets Mary (1:43); "Savior" by the angel who announces the birth of Jesus to the shepherds (2:11). The name, person and work of God are inseparably linked by Luke with the name, person and work of Jesus.

The holiness of God is frequently mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures, and there are many references to the "Holy Name" of God. "Holy" expresses the transcendence of God. He is wholly apart, wholly other. Yet the all-holy God is present to the people. The temple of God was considered holy because God's presence was there to receive the prayers and sacrifices of the people. The prophet Isaiah records God himself claiming to be high and exalted, living eternally, and whose name is the "Holy One." This same God claims to dwell on high, in holiness and yet also with the crushed and dejected in spirit, "to revive the spirits of the dejected, to revive the hearts of the crushed" (Isa. 57:15). Mary, who positions herself among the lowly ones, experiences God's holiness. The "Holy One" dwells with and within her.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke's second volume, the crucified and risen Jesus is recognized by the earliest Christians as the embodiment of God's holiness (Acts 3:14). St. Paul recognizes holiness in those who have received the Holy Spirit when he writes, "The temple of God is holy and you are that temple" (1 Cor. 3:17). God dwells within each of us. God's holy presence is within me and within you. Catholics acknowledge this indwelling when making the sign of the cross on themselves and invoking the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

What are we saying when we refer to God as holy? The words we use to speak of God have meaning for us because they come from our own human experience. We experience goodness in people and in things, and so we are able to comprehend the idea of goodness and, by analogy, consider absolute goodness in God. The term "holy" is commonly used of

persons who reflect moral goodness, great love and total commitment to God. Thus, saints are deemed holy. Also considered holy are things set apart for worship of God. God, however, abides in mystery, beyond that which our minds can comprehend. God, the "Holy One," is other. An experience of the otherness of God is an experience of God's holiness.

What is this otherness as it relates to God? God is. We are not. God creates. We are created. God is creator. We are creatures. Upon this truth hangs the mystery of our own existence, dependent and limited. God is holy. We claim holiness only inasmuch as God has chosen to abide with us and within us. Saints understood this truth. Catherine of Siena, anchored in understanding of her own dependent existence, relates God's word to her: "I am One who is. You are she who is not. You have become someone because I loved you."<sup>9</sup>

In stories of scripture, the mysterious presence of God elicits awe and wonder. Anyone who has seen the movie classic *The Ten Commandments* will remember the scene in which Charlton Heston as Moses encounters God on Mount Sinai. The awesomeness of God's presence is imaginatively depicted with smoke, thunder and lightening (Ex. 19:16-19). In contrast we read that the prophet Elijah encountered God not in strong wind, earthquake or fire, but in a tiny whispering sound (2 Kgs. 19:11-12). Both Moses and Elijah are directed by God to journey to a sacred place. There they must wait for God to initiate the encounter, for God is not subject to human control.

God is experienced as holy, that is, as something beyond ordinary human experience, in an encounter which may first inspire wonder or dread but be followed by a gentle stirring in the depths of the spirit. Authentic encounter with God may initially engender fear but results ultimately in joy. The first message of the angel to Mary, after she had been greeted, was the message to not be afraid. God's presence is awesome, but there is no need to cower before God's holiness. One cowers before a tyrant not before the God of compassion. The "Holy One" whom Mary bears in her womb is the embodiment of the

<sup>9</sup>Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena by Her Confessor*, trans. George Lamb (London: Harvill Press, 1960).

compassion of God. Elizabeth and her child recognize this holy presence within Mary. They are filled with joy.

As we ponder the meaning of this we may find ourselves trying to know the unknowable and caught in the paradox of attempting to find words to explain what we really do not know. A friend of mine once remarked, "If we think we know who God is, we are probably mistaken." Thomas Merton writes poetically of those who try to speak of the experience of God as "blind lions searching for springs in the desert."<sup>10</sup> The best way to get some human understanding of an encounter with the holiness of God is from human experience. There are voices within us and without us which speak to this experience.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus promised to send his Spirit to those of us who are his disciples. It is this presence of the Holy One within us that makes us holy. There is something irresistible about holiness in others. The peace and love which flows from authentically holy persons is healing for others. Burdens of guilt, fear, and self-loathing were lifted from those who encountered Jesus. Disciples of Jesus, who, like Mary, bear the presence of the Holy One to others are often persons whose presence is healing. The Franciscans tell a story concerning St. Clare. It seems that there was a companion of St. Francis who came down with a dreadful case of anxiety. Francis, not knowing what to do with this anxious and fearful brother, sent him to Clare. Clare told the brother to sleep in the place where she was praying. He did this. Clare continued her prayers. Some hours later the brother arose from deep slumber with a sense of wholeness and peace, cured of his anxiety.

There are ways to recognize holiness in others and to discern what is truly of God in spiritual experiences. One effect of the presence of the Holy One in a person's life is a genuine humility of heart. An experience of God's holiness and love

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Merton, *Tears of the Blind Lions: Poems* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1949).

<sup>11</sup>Rudolph Otto refers to an encounter with the holiness of God as a "numinous" experience which is both fearful and fascinating. For more information on the nature of an experience of the divine, refer to his classic work on the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational: *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1923).

leads one to see oneself more clearly. In the light of who God is we see who we are, which can be a humbling experience. Harsh judgment, prejudice and intolerance of others diminishes, as we comprehend our own limitedness and failure to love as God loves. Others appear more beautiful and lovable to us. St. Catherine of Siena uses the image of a mirror to explain this. "As we gaze into the mirror of God's holiness we see the spots on our own faces." Humility of heart makes one loving and lovable.

A second effect of the presence of the Holy One in one's life is poverty of spirit. There is a yearning for God that eclipses the desire for material goods, position, power, prestige and comfort. The need to place one's security in having power and wealth is replaced by finding one's security in God's love. There is no need to control others or use them for self gratification. Poverty of spirit makes one trustworthy. The good of others is as desirable as one's own.

A third effect of the presence of the Holy One in one's life is what is called long-suffering in St. Paul's listing of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). This is also translated as patient endurance. It is a determination to stay the course in fidelity to God over the long haul. It is the ability to make a commitment and remain with that commitment through many difficulties. It is the courage to remain faithful to prayer in times of spiritual aridity, the will to love in the face of hatred and injustice, the energy to strive for reconciliation in the midst of conflict. To endure suffering in order to achieve a higher good requires spiritual stamina. Dorothy Day reminded us that while love in the abstract may be romantic, love in action is "a harsh and dreadful reality."

Mary proclaims in her Magnificat that God's name is holy. She has encountered the Holy One and within her womb the Holy One has become incarnate. Mary calls herself lowly. She places herself among the poor and humble people of Israel and responds in wonder to God regard for her lowliness. Mary is faithful to the end. She endures the pain of her son's suffering and death. After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, she is present with the other disciples in the upper room awaiting the descent of the Holy Spirit. For generation upon generation,

she has been loved and trusted by those who invoke her help. Poverty of spirit, humility of heart and patient endurance characterized Mary's life. In this she is the exemplar of one in whom the Spirit of God dwells.

### **Right Relationship with God**

The faith of Mary in God her savior and her response to the great things that God has done for her is expressed in the first part of the Magnificat (vv.46-50). In the second part (vv. 51-55), we see that Mary's faith is the faith of Israel. The canticle that Luke puts on Mary's lips is sung not only for herself as an individual, but also for the messianic people who yearn and hope for the promises of the Lord to be fulfilled. The South American theologians, Maria Clara Bingemer and Ivone Gebara, call the Magnificat "a meditation in poetic form on the wonders God works in the history of salvation." The same God who formed the Messiah in Mary's womb is the God who made possible the exodus from Egypt. For Yahweh, God of Israel, nothing is impossible. Mary, positioned in the midst of the "lowly ones," has the prophetic vision to observe the reversal of the situation of social sin, rooted in personal sin, that is brought about by the Incarnation of the Word. This reversal is consistent with the way that God has dealt with his people in the past, especially in the Exodus.

The forces opposed to God and to the lowly ones who are the recipients of God's mercy are set forth. First are pride, power and riches. In a great eschatological act, God is bringing about the reversal of the situation. The Reign of God surprises us. The social condition is turned up-side-down.

Pondering the action of God—in confusing the arrogant in the conceit of their hearts, that is, in the inner core of their being; pulling down tyrants from thrones and sending the rich away empty—causes us some uneasiness. Who are the arrogant? Père Lagrange suggests it is those whose intellectual pride blinds them to truth. Scholars and intellectuals take note. Who are the tyrants? Perhaps those who use their authority to enhance their own well-being at the expense of their subjects. Those whose position of authority gives them power over others. Power is like poison. It needs to be spread around to make



it less toxic. Who are the rich? Those of us who are well-fed, well-housed, well-clothed, well-educated take note. Are we consuming more than our share of the resources of the world that belong to all the people of the world?

"God has shown strength with his arm." This is a military image. It is the strong arm of the warrior that draws the bow and wields the sword. What are we to think of God's action against the proud, powerful and greedy? Those who have lived through oppressive regimes in Central America or elsewhere bring their experience to the interpretation of these lines. One missionary sister said to me, "It looks like God takes revenge, but God does not take revenge. Those who oppress others must be made to face up to what they are doing." Another who had ministered twenty years in the Congo told me that, when she returned from Africa devastated by what she had experienced there, the only prayer that she could say was the Magnificat.

In contrast to God's action against oppressors is God's action for the oppressed. The powerless are lifted up, the hungry are fed. The humble perceive the truth of where God is at work bringing about the "*reign*." God levels the field, so to speak. All are being brought into the reign of right relationships. God's loving mercy is poured out on the fearing ones, the humble, powerless and poor who are in right covenant relationship with God. The proud, powerful and greedy need to be brought into right covenant relationship. But we cannot be in right relationship with God without being in right relationship with each other.

### **Reversal of Fortunes**

The great eschatological reversal of fortunes which is characteristic of the Reign of God begins with the humbling of the proud whose attitude brings them in conflict with the values of the kingdom. Within the kingdom, the whole community is blessed by the humble attitude that a person holds toward God, inasmuch as this humility finds expression in that person's attitude toward others. The pattern of reversal of fortunes is echoed in the "blessings" and "woes" set forth by Luke in the discourse on the plain (6:20-24). Also, there is an

allusion to the reversal of fortunes in the prophecy of Simeon, when he tells Mary that her son is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel (2:43).

The action of God in lowering the proud and exalting the humble, dethroning the powerful and empowering the lowly, feeding the hungry and sending the rich away empty is dramatic. It appeals to our sense of distributive justice. We like to see the underdog win. This is God's action. In reality the action of God is often subtle, behind what is immediately evident. A Magnificat spirituality holds the strong conviction that God is at work, bringing about the final victory over all the forces that oppress and diminish those he loves. A sign of the presence of the Reign of God is a political and social situation of just relationships in keeping with God's will, where there is no hunger among the many because of the greed of a few.

Raymond Brown states that the poverty and hunger of the oppressed in the Magnificat are primarily spiritual. Yet, for the poor, the good news of the Magnificat is that wealth and power are not real values and that, ultimately, the blessed are not the mighty and rich. Our spirituality is lived out in our life style, in our service for others, in the causes we support and in the political choices we make. As Christians, we have a responsibility to cooperate with God in bringing about a just social situation in distribution of power and resources. But it is dangerous to interpret the message of the Magnificat to mean fomenting or justifying a violent revolution which would take power and wealth from one group and give it to another, thus creating a new group of oppressed.

The liberation in the Magnificat is a religious liberation from sin, from pride, from the quest for power, from greed. Social liberation follows from this. Mary calls herself lowly and is in solidarity with all who are in any way oppressed. Her yes to God puts her in solidarity with God's salvific action. Her mission is to bear the Messiah who will bring about God's reign of justice among all people. Entering into Mary's interior disposition puts us in solidarity with God's salvific action. Each of us has a mission. It flows from our spirituality, our way of relating to God. To be in right covenant relationship with God, we

must be in right covenant relationship with one another and with all peoples. Today we might add that it is necessary to be in right relationship with the earth and all its creatures. The welfare of all of us depends upon caring for the earth and conserving our resources.

### **Servant Theme**

In the concluding verses of the Magnificat, the principal reasons for praising God are summarized into one great fact: "God has upheld Israel, his servant, ever mindful of his mercy." In calling Israel his servant, Mary identifies herself as servant, representative of Israel.

Israel as servant of the Lord is depicted in the four Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13-53). Here, a prophetic and suffering figure of a Messiah appears. In this future Messiah, Israel's mission to the world will be accomplished. In our Holy Week liturgy, we have allusions to Jesus the Suffering Servant, the one who in union with God's will takes on the sins of the people and suffers abuse patiently. After a time of suffering, the servant is exalted by God. The Servant suffers violence but does not respond with violence.

Piet Schoonenberg teaches that all of Jesus' life was salvific, because all was done in union with the will of the Father. Jesus is the Mercy of God. The Christian mission is to enter into the mission of Jesus in bringing all things into right relationship with God. How are we to do this? By recognizing the Reign of God in our midst, seeing where God is acting to bring all things into reconciliation and peace, and being in cooperation with this action.

Today, analyzing world events with a gospel understanding, we note that violence begets violence. To attempt to right wrongs by violent means increases violence. The spiral into ever deeper violence is difficult to stop once it begins. Hatred and the desire for revenge cannot be beaten out of a person or out of a national memory. The message of the Magnificat and the beatitudes is that God is acting to bring about the reign of right relationships, the reign of justice and therefore of peace. To be in solidarity with the action of God is to actively resist evil in a way that does not perpetrate more evil. Non-violent

resistance to injustice flows out of a spirituality that trusts God's action.

A news item during the war in Lebanon a few years back caught my attention. In the city of Beirut there was fierce fighting in the streets. Mother Teresa of Calcutta arrived on the scene to evacuate children from a children's hospital that was caught in the midst of the violence. When she walked into the midst of the battle, all sides held their fire. News cameras captured her standing in a street, surrounded by destruction, holding a small child in her arms. She had but one comment, "This is insanity." The message of the Magnificat is a message of hope. The mercy of God prevails. In the final analysis, all will be well. All manner of things will be well.

### **Conclusion**

Mary's song has echoed over two thousand years of Christianity, calling to us each evening at Vespers to sing out in gratitude to God for our blessings, to put on the mind of Mary and to enter into the dynamism of the coming of the Reign of God, the reign of right and just relationships. Where do we find God's reign? Wherever God is acting on behalf of the people and we are participating in this action, there is the Reign of God.

Two thousand years have passed and still in so many places the rich eat the bread produced by the labors of the poor. Where is the "Holy One" who fills the minds, hearts, spirits and bellies of the hungry? Still thrones of nations are occupied by the mighty, supported not by sword or lance but by weapons of mass destruction. Where is the strong arm of the "Mighty One" who pulls down the powerful and exalts the humble? Still the arrogant crush the hearts and spirits of those who are despised among us, the homeless, the mentally ill, victims of violence, the handicapped, the helpless young and elderly, those about whom we prefer not to see or think. With the old Rabbi of Elie Wiesel's story we ask, "Where is the mercy of God? Where is the God of mercy?"

Wherever the Reign of God is found here today in our midst, there is the place where the poor are filled, the lowly are given dignity, the arrogant are confused and warring parties are reconciled. Do we know this place? Do we, like Mary, have the

wisdom to recognize the signs of God's reign here in our midst? Mary's song is our song. May the wisdom of God dwell in us as it dwelt in Mary, that we too may have knowledge of divine things, recognize where God is at work, and be friends and prophets of God (Wis. 7:27).

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